

# Just Business

by Paul Danner

The old man let out a loud groan and rolled over onto his back. The alley stunk bad. The Turka brothers stunk worse. From the odor one would tend to think neither of the Efluqui siblings had seen the inside of a sonic shower in months. One would be correct...

Hurka, the elder Turka, sniffed the man's cred sticks like fine Savareen brandy. Efluqui have a very developed sense of smell. Their olfactory ability allows them to detect the presence of another of their kind over 100 meters away; which is good because Efluqui do not get along famously as a rule. Famously meaning without vibroblades and the rapid depletion of important bodily fluids. They often fail to observe galactic standards of cleanliness in order to mask their scent from other Efluqui. On the whole, the species is nasty, cruel, and violent. Born criminals. The brothers Hurka were one of the few exceptions. Still nasty, cruel, and violent, but they got along. Sort of...

"A lousy 1,500 credits," said Hurka and delivered a swift kick to the fallen man's ribs.

Murka sneered at his brother. "I told you there wasn't no money to be made in robbery." He took his turn giving the old guy some more heel-and-toe treatment. "We need to get back into the black market before we starve."

"I ain't beggin' that lousy Anomid for nothing!" Hurka Turka punctuated his statement with another strong boot that sent the man crashing into a pile of garbage.

"There's plenty of other crimelords around," Murka argued. He was the smarter of the two. Which was like saying one piece of ipplar fruit wasn't quite as filled with maggelworms, so eat up. "Just not on this stupid world."

"And who's idea was that? 'Let's go to Lianna, Hurka. There's no crime there. We can corner da market.' *Rokosh*." Hurka emphasized the Efluqui curse with a wad of phlegm which he sent sailing over his brother's head. Among normal Efluqui that simple action would result in immediate bloodshed.

Murka was momentarily lost in thought, however, and did not notice the challenge.

The old man started crawling away as quickly as he could crawl which wasn't all that fast with multiple contusions, two cracked ribs, and a broken leg.

"The secret of enterprise is seeing a void and filling it. How was I supposed to know this place was a black hole?" Murka shook his jowly head. "Who ever heard of a world where carrying weapons is illegal..."

"We could go talk to Vocta. I hear he's throwing some kind of party at Traxx this weekend." Hurka shrugged his thick shoulders. "Maybe he'll send an invitation..."

"*Rokosh!* Vocta accused us of skimming an extra five percent off the Tanalodi deal."

"Which we did," Hurka added helpfully.

"Do you really think he's going to invite us to his party?"

"Anything's possible."

The sound of an approaching repulsorlift drew their attention. Their noses were indeed sharp, but neither had apparently detected the small, spherical droid bobbing toward them.

"What's that thing?" Hurka asked.

Murka squinted. "Looks like a message droid. Rich people use them all the time here."

The compact globe of circuitry in question was indeed a mechanical messenger. The Arakyd Seeker AS-M12, designed to first locate and identify the intended recipient and then deliver a prerecorded message of the sender's choosing.

The small droid hovered in front of them, quietly whirring as it scanned the brothers Turka.

"Sometimes they need a password," Murka advised sagely.

"Like what?"

"*Rokosh*. How should I know? I wasn't expecting a delivery."

The Seeker beeped twice, apparently satisfied.

"I think we passed."

Murka grinned broadly, displaying yellowing fangs. "Maybe Vocta is sending us a message..."

The beaten and bruised old man had finally reached the end of the alleyway. He was about to cry out for help when the explosion erupted from behind him. The resulting shockwave shook the entire block. Soaring flames erupted over his head like jets of firespray and thick black smoke trailed high into the bright blue Liann sky.

Yin Vocta leaned over the railing, staring down at the lower level of Bantha Traxx. He held one of the plush bantha dolls sold in the gift shop. He was absently spinning the small stuffed beast by its horns as he surveyed his club. The crowd was still thin, as it often was just after opening. A scattering of beings started to occupy the dance floorpit, moving to their own interpretation of the beat. The tables were occupied mostly by couples now, the larger groups of revelers out for a good time having yet to gather into a wandering herd and trample inside the club.

If Vocta heard Sha'Dria approach, he gave no outward sign. "A credit for your thoughts," she said. With a languorous yawn, Sha'Dria stretched out across the railing beside the Anomid.

Vocta's attention never wavered from below even as he responded, "My dear, you should know by now that my musings are worth a substantial bit more than that..."

"Everything is money with you."

"Yes," he answered without a microsecond's hesitation. "Speaking of which, who's watching your cooling station?"

Sha'Dria gazed over her shoulder at the Oasis. Usually the most crowded of the three bars scattered throughout Traxx, even its business had yet to pick up. "Sysrci is covering for me. I think she can handle the current crowd."

"Yes, I suppose she can." Vocta finally turned his attention to the beautiful woman beside him. "Though with nowhere near the panache of its usual tender." The corners of his eyes crinkled, which was the only way to tell whether the Anomid was smiling underneath his vocalizer mask. "The line between competence and adeptness is often the difference between loss and profit."

Sha'Dria adjusted her own intricately designed mask, the cheeks coloring ever so slightly. "My, my... Was that a compliment?"

"Merely a statement of fact," Vocta said, interlacing his dozen fingers into a complex pattern around the bantha doll. He absently wondered if her mask was empathic or merely translucent to color. "Take from it what you wish."

"I will," she said, the trace of a smile dancing across her lips. "And thank you."

Vocta nodded absently, resuming his observation. After a moment, he indicated an attractive couple snuggled up in a corner booth with a bottle. "Over there... You see those two?"

Sha'Dria nodded, watching as the young blond woman poured another drink for her tall, dark, and handsome companion. "How romantic," she sighed.

"Oh, yes," Vocta said, his eyes glinting with mischief. "That lovely young woman looks positively stunning in that diaphanous little black dress, however I'm sure her suitor won't think she looks quite so desirable in her usual ISB dress grays..."

"How could you possibly -- "

"I have my ways." For a moment, he seemed reluctant to elaborate, then finally relented. "The girl arrived early and ordered a bottle of vintage Bepin Port. Its unique sweet and sour taste is an ideal choice for disguising any foreign substances. In fact the drink is used so extensively by assassins and other unsavory types, it has earned the nickname of Bepin Surprise."

"Foreign substances?"

"Such as the sleep inducer being released right now from that oversized gaudy ring on her thumb. ISB standard issue device. Rather obvious, but effective."

"Well..." Sha'Dria bit her lower lip. "Sometimes even undercover agents fall in love."

"Yes, but not with their marks. That young man is most likely an Alliance operative. I've seen him in here before, heard him asking the wrong questions. Questions that got him noticed." The Anomid shrugged noncommittally. "She's probably been reeling him in like a glowflounder on a line for quite some time."

Sha'Dria shook her head in amazement, then carefully studied Vocta's impassive face. "So, you can tell a spy just by looking at him. Or her."

Vocta coolly met her stare, and they locked eyes for a moment. "Not always."

Before Sha'Dria could respond, Vocta noticed Tezz gesturing in the distance. The nervous human seemed to be desperate to gain his master's attention, without alerting Sha'Dria. If Tezz was daring enough to interrupt, then something important was occurring. Most likely something bad.

The Anomid tilted his head almost imperceptibly, hoping that even a dimrod like Tezz would pick up on the sign.

Vocta touched a hand to the bartender's bare shoulder. "Be a dear and save my space." The Anomid started toward his office, and was relieved to see Tezz had already disappeared from sight. Maybe his assistant *was* actually a bit smarter than a ronto. "I'll be right back."

"Is that a threat or a promise?" Sha'Dria called softly after him.

Vocta looked over his shoulder at her, offering a quick wink. He tossed the stuffed bantha over to her. "Take from it what you wish."

The door slid shut behind Vocta as he entered his luxurious office. Tezz was already perched next to Vocta's antique braidenwood desk, his usual expression of utter anxiety at the ready. This time however, the palpable distress was mixed with a dash of distraction.

Vocta slipped into the cool white replihide chair and waited. After a few long moments, he stared up at Tezz... Drummed a fingertip... Admired the crossed gaderffii sticks mounted on the wall... "You know, I've yet to complete that Jedi mind-reading correspondence course..."

"Sir?"

The Anomid let out an audible sigh and waved a six-fingered hand. "What's the problem, Tezz?"

"It's Na-Grujha, sir."

Vocta cocked an eyebrow. "What about him?"

"He's left countless messages for you to contact him in reference to..." Tezz lowered his voice to conspiracy level. "The shipment."

The Anomid resisted the urge to roll his eyes. If there was one place on Lianna where you could talk freely without the slightest concern of surveillance or eavesdropping equipment, it was Vocta's office. "I should know better than to deal with an Ipharian-Da'Lor. Even a wealthy one..."

"Na-Grujha is most insistent about speaking with you about the matter. He is rather... Intimidating."

Vocta chuckled. "Ah, Tezz... There are only two categories of dangerous beings in this entire galaxy. Intimidators and achievers. An intimidator puts his victim in a ship's airlock without a vac suit and holds a finger over the control switch. The intimidator is only dangerous because someone else allows him to be," Vocta said as he activated his personal communications unit.

The Vec-Tech Holocomm 450 built into his desk was cutting edge in both transmission quality and security issues, with the usual elegant simplicity of Vec-Tech design. The high technology company produced items that were usually second to none in quality and price, which should come as no surprise if one happened to know Yin Vocta owned the profitable business.

"Then there are the achievers..." Vocta entered his passcode and punched in the numbers. Finished, he looked up at Tezz and winked. "They just blow up the whole damned ship in the first place."

Tezz considered that for a moment, and immediately knew which methodology his boss sanctioned. A tiny shiver ran down his back.

There was a momentary hum as information instantly transferred through the comm. Vocta turned his chair to face the large three-dimensional holoscreen that slid out of the wall behind his desk, unfolding itself into a triangular frame. "Leave me."

Tezz quickly obeyed, vacating the office.

The air inside the viewer crackled to eerie life, projecting the ferocious image of Itahn Na-Grujha in three terrifying spatial dimensions. The serpentine Ipharian-Da'Lor had a fearsome visage, with an elongated snout, large slanted pupils the color of fire-gems, and row after row of razor-sharp teeth. For this reason the majority of his species who dealt with the public concealed their faces in order to facilitate interaction. Na-Grujha did not particularly care if he caused someone discomfort. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed it.

"Vocta," Na-Grujha hissed. "I want those detonators..."

"Relax Itahn, you'll have them as promised."

"When?"

"On schedule." Vocta's face remained impassive. "One standard week from today."

"Do you have them now?"

"It makes little difference whether I do or do not. Our agreement specified the transaction date."

"I could put them to good use immediately," the Ipharian-Da'Lor said, his words punctuated by the off-screen *clik-clak* sound caused by the extension and retraction of his tail spike.

"I don't doubt that," Vocta replied dryly. "As a matter of fact, I am awaiting their arrival..."

"When is the shipment expected?"

"Again, that is not your concern."

Na-Grujha's spinal ridge quivered with rage. "I am spending one quarter of a million credits, Vocta. Anything you do while under the auspices of our agreement *is* my concern."

Vocta's eyes narrowed to slits. "Tell me, Itahn... Are you familiar with the old Barabel saying about treading lightly upon the gravmine field? Try to remember that I am your facilitator. Not your servant."

"And you try to remember that I am not one of your usual two-credit nerf-robbers. Until our contract is fulfilled and I am in possession of those detonators, you are what I say you are."

Vocta tilted his head as if admonishing a small child. His tone of voice adjusted accordingly. "I do hope that wasn't intended as a threat."

"Of course not." Na-Grujha smiled without a hint of benevolence. It was difficult to be disarming with a mouthful of razors. "Think of it more as a rather obvious insinuation."

"I see... How fortunate for both of us then." Vocta paused for a moment. "By the way, how is Dekalba doing?"

Na-Grujha seemed momentarily bewildered. "I haven't heard from that old pirate in months. Word is he vanished into the Expanse while attempting the Reecris Run." The reptilian eyes blinked in rapid succession. "Why?"

"His name just popped into my head for some reason," Vocta said with a shrug. "Hmmm... Oddly enough, I believe Dekalba's last words to me were, 'You better watch your back, Vocta.'" The Anomid chuckled. "Funny how you recall these things at the strangest of times. Don't you think?"

"Yes," Na-Grujha hissed through his front row of incisors, "Utterly whimsical."

"I assume then, that we are clear on this matter."

"Crystalline," Na-Grujha said, then added innocently: "By the way, I hear your staff assassins..." He momentarily touched an embarrassed claw to his mouth. "Whoops... I mean assistants, are off on a mission. Pity that neither R'Kayza nor Tice will be there to keep an eye on you during this dangerous time. From one former pilot to another, I'd make sure to watch my six."

"I appreciate the advice. It always warms the hearts when a friend looks out for me." Vocta abruptly shut off the holocomm unit and the Ipharian-Da'Lor crimelord vanished like a Defel in the night.

Vocta reclined back in the comfortable replihide chair, steepling his fingers under his chin. Usually it was the Anomid who cornered the information market. Apparently, he had slightly underestimated Na-Grujha's resources. Not a matter to dwell on, though. The oversight had been noted, and it was time to move on... Vocta always allowed himself mistakes. As long as they were never repeated.

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"Excuse me for a moment, while I freshen up," Solette said with a sly wink. She stood up from the table and sauntered toward the refresher, moving with a slow sensual gait that utilized her assets to maximum efficiency. The slinky and rather abbreviated dress clinging to her athletic physique only increased the overall seductive effectiveness.

Broegan watched her retreating form, completely mesmerized by her rhythmic sway. He blinked a few times to try and clear his head, but thoughts were traveling as slow as the glaciers of Hoth. More than anything he was tired, which was strange because he had gotten a good night's rest. Broegan always made sure to do so while on assignment. Especially one as important as this. He certainly didn't want to throw a hydrosponder in these particular works...

*Maybe another shot of Bespin Port will clear things up a bit,* he thought as he reached over to refill his emptied glass.

He couldn't quite believe his luck so far... Not only had he found someone to utilize as part of his cover, but that someone happened to be a beautiful girl! Even better, she seemed genuinely interested in him. Enough so to buy the drinks herself, anyway. That had never happened to Broegan before.

He grinned through the haze that drifted across his consciousness and finished pouring. Though more Port had landed on the table surface than in his glass tumbler, there was enough for a few more sweet-sour swallows.

Solette stepped inside the female refresher room and locked the door behind her. She inverted the right strap of her dress, revealing a tiny comlink pinned to the soft cloth. As Solette keyed the secure device, the private communications channel automatically scrambled itself, to be decoded kilometers away at a concealed Imperial military facility.

"Clear," she stated sotto voice and then added with a hint of irritation: "What is it, Control?"

A tinny voice answered. "We have detected an encoded transmission from your location. Originating inside Vocta's office."

"Decrypt?"

"Negative," came the filtered response. "The holo-carrier was highly sophisticated. However, the broadcast was tracked by our Beta-Hound Program through each of its bandwidth jump points... To a location on Lianna."

Solette's mouth fell open slightly. "The buyer is here, then. Transmit the precise address to my datapad as soon as possible."

"Acknowledged." There was a slight pause. "Status report?"

"With this information, I may no longer have need of the Rebel." Her full lips slid back in a feral grin. "I assume disposal parameters apply?"

"That is affirmative... once information is confirmed. Control out."

Broegan lifted the glass to his lips and noticed a huge misshapen giant towering in front of him. Startled, he coughed the tiny swig of Port out into the air. As he slammed the glass back down to the table to confront the monster, Broegan's face reddened. The man who stood there had appeared grotesque at first glance but only because he'd been viewed through the prismatic bottom of the tumbler. In actuality, the newcomer was a fairly thin waiter, holding a small courtesy datapad. Like nearly everything else in the club, it was emblazoned with the stylized 'Bantha Traxx' bantha pawprint.

The waiter handed over the datapad without a word and slipped away. Broegan activated the control buttons and stared at the message that appeared. The words were difficult to make out in his current condition. After much blinking and straining, Broegan found that by squeezing his eyes partways shut he could finally decipher the lettering.

It read, 'YOUR DINING COMPANION IS A MEMBER OF THE IMPERIAL SUNBATHERS AND BIRDWATCHERS

- A FRIEND.'

Solette smiled into the vanity mirror as she readjusted her dress. A quick hip wiggle set everything in its place, including the cool plasteel of the ionic tingler tucked into her thigh garter. Of course with the speed with which that idiot Rebel was downing sleep inducer-laced Port, she didn't even need the back-up weapon.

*Every mission should be this simple.* At this rate, she'd have her hands on the shipment in no time, not to mention an entire Rebel Ops cell.

She ran a manicured hand through the mass of blond ringlets, putting the finishing touches on the package.

*And what a package it was...* She blew herself a kiss in the mirror and prowled to the door with the assured gait of a born predator.

The crowd at Traxx was beginning to expand to usual levels. More and more customers, the vast majority of them male, surrounded the cooling station known as The Oasis. Sha'Dria found herself buzzing back and forth, pouring brandy and ale and lum, delivering knowing smiles and quick winks, and collecting generous tips.

While running glasses through the sonic cleanser, Sha'Dria happened to glance over at a table occupied by a half-empty bottle of Bespin Port. The blond woman that Vocta had pointed out as an ISB Agent stood there for a moment, staring at the liquid left sloshed across the tabletop. For the merest fraction of time, Sha'Dria saw a look of rage spill across the young woman's face and then just as suddenly the ravishing countenance returned to its original placidity.

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Vocta watched Sha'Dria closely as she turned back to the customers. Her facial expression would remain a mystery beneath the concealment of the N'Noch, her term for the intricately designed mask she wore. Sha'Dria gave nothing away, even with her body language. Not the tiniest hint of emotion could be detected at present, her entire being obstinately refusing to let the veneer slip - as the foolish ISB woman did upon discovery that her Alliance Special Ops mark had hastily jumped system.

The Anomid had paid special attention to those mysterious eyes with which Sha'Dria viewed the world. His monitor unit was zeroed in point blank so her otherwise obscured face filled the screen. Bantha Traxx boasted one of the clearest vid surveillance systems in the sector, capable of covering the entire club. With the aid of its macrozoom remote lenses, Vocta could count the hairs on a Wookiee. With their magnification he was very nearly there sitting across from Sha'Dria and staring directly into her pupils, yet there was little to see; the sensation analogous to staring into a mirror. Vocta's silent inquiries were reflected back upon him...

Vocta never met a species that he could not comprehend simply by staring into their ocular organs for a short time. (Those that possessed them at least.) But this girl... Shalana Driana, Sha'Dria as she preferred to be called, she was not like any other he had ever known. Her enigmatic presence had graced his establishment for over a year and he knew as much about Sha'Dria now as he did when he hired her; if not less, for many of his preconceived notions had been blasted into vaporebait.

The Anomid sighed in frustration. He lived and breathed information. This girl who hid so much, not only behind her mask but her eyes as well, was effectively choking him. And the worst part... He thoroughly enjoyed it.

Vocta continued to study that lovely visage upon his screen, tracing a finger along her cheekbone. To an Anomid this was an extremely intimate gesture, for it meant that the subject's vocalizer mask had been removed.

His door chime sounded abruptly, effectively shattering the moment.

Vocta didn't bother to look up. "Go away."

Tezz's voice seemed more anxious than usual. "Sir, he's rather insistent -- Oof!"

There was the distinct sound of someone hitting the door, then it slid open, revealing a crisply uniformed officer. Commander Byeslee of the Liann Military Guard. Byeslee strutted inside, sucking most of the air out of the room as he puffed out his chest to display row after row of medals. The Commander was followed inside by two deputies, a plasteele wall impersonating a male human and a rather lovely young Seneerian woman, who immediately took up standard flanking positions. All three members of the Guard rested a hand on their blaster pistols.

Vocta rolled his eyes.

"Will that be all, sir?" Tezz asked the life-size statue of Tsincria, one of the greatest Anomid dealmakers to ever live.

"Yes, Tezz," Vocta answered with a prolonged sigh. "You're dismissed."

Tezz mistakenly bowed to the statue and walked out of the office. Rubbing his bruised head, Tezz first thumbed the control panel and, after the door had actually opened, he stepped out.

"My new minor domo," Vocta said nodding toward the retreating form of Tezz.

"Don't you mean major domo?"

"Yes well, he still needs some work," Vocta explained flatly. "And he had references, if you can imagine... Well, that's the last time I listen to Jabba."

"Hard to find good help these days." Byeslee sneered.

“Not only in the private sector but apparently in the Liann Military Guard as well.”

Byeslee abruptly stepped forward. From the look on his face, it wasn't apparent whether the man was going to stop at the edge of Vocta's desk or simply burst right through it.

Vocta reclined back in his chair just in case. “And I see the word ‘private’ has finally seceded from your vocabulary.”

The Commander stopped short, quickly sliding his fingers across the polished surface of the Anomid's desk. “Yes, it was replaced by the word ‘crimelord’. A recent and unwanted import to our world.” Byeslee paused for dramatic effect. “Much like yourself.”

The Anomid interlaced his fingers and stared at Byeslee. “Is there a compelling reason for this little visit or did you just stop in to say hello?”

“I don't make social calls.”

“And more's the pity considering your gregarious nature.”

“Shut up, Vocta.” Byeslee pointed a gloved finger dead center of the Anomid's chest. “You're coming with us.”

Vocta winked at the female officer, who reddened slightly under his approving gaze. “As pleasant as I find that idea, may I ask why?”

“Questioning. Earlier today, there was an explosion in an alleyway that killed the Turka brothers.” The Commander ticked off what happened on his fingers. “Pieces of a message droid, various Efluqui parts, traces of detonite, and the stink of your involvement.”

“How ingenious. Equip an Arakyd Seeker with a small storage compartment, some detonite, and a proximity detonator, then program it to hunt down a target's bio-signature and explode. I wish I'd thought of that.” The Anomid shook his head. “So poor Murka and Hurka are gone? With that kind of drop in the crime rate, I suppose you'll have nothing better to do than harass innocent merchants trying to make an honest living.”

“You couldn't detect an honest act if it sidled up and kicked you in the --”

“Anyway, how am I *allegedly* connected to this heinous deed?”

“That's exactly what I want to know. I've heard rumors of your involvement with the Turkas. Using the Efluqui scum as go-betweens for black market dealings with the Tanalodi clan... Not an auspicious crowd to be linked with, is it?”

“That's a wonderfully imaginative story.” Vocta said, his eyes crinkling with delight. “Although apparently there's no factual correlation, or I'd venture to say I'd be in custody at the moment.”

“Music to my ears.” The Commander gestured for Vocta to stand. “Come on, we'll finish this at the precinct house.”

“Regretfully, I must decline,” Vocta answered, remaining pleasantly seated. “If I was languishing away in an interrogation room then who would be left to plan the grandest party of the year tomorrow night?”

“Oh yes, your wonderful little soiree that everyone's talking about.” Byeslee leaned over the desk, his multiple medals jangling with authority. “I'll be keeping a close eye on the proceedings, you know.”

“Did you receive an invitation?”

“Must have gotten lost.”

Vocta nodded sagely. “The *only* explanation.”

“Don't think for a moment I'd hesitate carrying out my duty under the law over an anniversary gala for a club owned by the likes of you.”

The Anomid shrugged. “So many dignitaries and socialites would be rather disappointed especially since a considerable percentage of the proceeds will go to charity. All the Santhes will be there, including Lady Valles... Perhaps you've heard of them. They own this little planet.”

“I don't care about your friends in high places, Vocta. Because when I have the appropriate evidence even they won't be able to save you.” Byeslee stood, straightening his uniform and adjusting his medals. “Very well. We'll conclude your questioning after the party. And in the meantime, should I find even the merest monofilament's link between yourself and the murder of the Turkas, well then...” The Commander let the threat hang in the air.

"You'll give me a good citizenship award?" Vocta asked innocently, eliciting a snicker from the Seneerian girl which was quickly choked off under Byeslee's withering gaze.

"Good day," the Commander said, sharply turning on his heel and marching out the door.

The mute plasteel wall immediately followed but the Seneerian girl lingered just long enough to smile and accept a quick wink from Vocta before joining her comrades.

The door slid shut and Vocta was alone again.

Almost.

"Tik chakka ataidi," said a gravelly voice behind Vocta.

The Anomid didn't bother to turn as the small black-clad creature separated itself from the shadows. The Jawa smoothed its black leather robing and continued chattering in a near unrecognizable blur of speech.

Vocta nodded in agreement.

Jik'Tal drew a thin vibroknife from his sleeve. The Jawa's large yellow eyes moved along the edge of the wickedly serrated blade, which reflected their sinister glow.

The Anomid couldn't help but smile at that. "Soon, my friend... Soon."

"Hatak me chiza nebat."

"Yes, far too much. Apparently one of the Tanalodi clan apparently spilled his guts." Vocta slowly turned his head to nod at the Jawa. "I think it's only fair we return the favor. Don't you?"

He received no answer. Jik'Tal was already gone.

"Give me a home where the rontos still roam and the Jawas and Krayt Dragons play..." Vocta hummed the rest of the tune idly, lost in his thoughts. Until a familiarly grating voice finally interrupted.

"Sir?" Tezz poked his head inside the office. "I rang the chime, but there was no answer... My apologies for disturbing you, but I wanted to make sure you were --"

"Fine, fine." Vocta stood, stretching his shoulders. "Is there news?"

His assistant nodded. "I just received a curious transmission from Mah-Luu's people. The shipment will arrive tomorrow night at exactly 1900 hours via speeder truck." Tezz arched an eyebrow. "Which is during the gala... Is that right, sir?"

"What better way to sneak in the dewback than through the front door?"

"Sir?"

"Never mind," Vocta sighed, then arched a speculative eyebrow. "Wouldn't want the dessert to go flat."

"Ah, yes... Only the best for your guests."

"Yes, Tezz," Vocta agreed. "Only the best."

"And according to the invoice there is the matter of 10 crates instead of five..."

"Tezz?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you have the slightest idea of what I do?"

Tezz was taken aback by the odd question. "Of course... You operate a very popular club as well as perform the CEO duties for your company, Vec-Tech."

"What exactly did you do for Jabba?"



"I booked his entertainment," Tezz answered proudly. "You know Sy Snootles and the Max Rebo band? My idea to bring them to the Palace. Also Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes. A relative coup as this was at the time before they hit it big..." His voice trailed off at Vocta's soft laughter.

"That bloated space slug certainly put one over on me this time," Vocta said ruefully. "That's what Jabba meant when he said that you could 'run the whole show...'"

"Sir?"

"Never mind." Vocta indicated a chair. "Have a seat. It's time for a crash course in managing my affairs."

Tezz shrugged and sat down. "Very well."

The Anomid leaned across the desk, eye sparkling. "Tell me, what do you know about thermal detonators?"

Sha'Dria stared up at the night sky, hidden among the starscrapers of Lianna. She found small patches of heaven in between the towering architecture and smiled at each new discovery. Sha'Dria imagined herself floating among them, or drifting atop a pool of fragrant steamwater, anywhere really except here seated upon a trash compactor in a dingy alleyway with a fragrance all its own.

With a sigh she peeked at her jeweled chronometer. Her break was almost up...

"A credit for your thoughts..."

Sha'Dria looked down at her employer standing there beside the compactor, his expensive clothing looking out of place among the piles of refuse. She couldn't help but laugh.

"Do I look like that cheap a date to you?"

"Hardly." Vocta hoisted himself up beside her. "Do you mind if I join you?"

She shrugged. "Hey, it's your trash compactor."

"So it is," Vocta nodded.

"What are you doing out here?"

"It's also my alleyway."

"So it is."

"I suddenly realized that I spend most of my waking hours in that office and had the dreadful thought that I was turning into my father." Vocta scanned the stars above. "Such a beautiful night. Shame to waste it alone."

Sha'Dria gave him a sideways glance. "You're a complicated man."

"Please call me Yin."

"I'd be out of line as your employee."

"You'd be out of line to refuse." Vocta glanced at her and smiled. "And I'd be out of line to make it an order. Do as you wish."

"I usually do."

"I don't doubt that," Vocta said. He noticed a new rainbow-threaded bracelet around her wrist. "A token of someone's love?"

"Hmmm?" She followed his gaze and chuckled. "Oh, that? No. Yes. Sort of... It's from Miri. A girl I work with at Santhe House."

"The charity of the moment for Liann socialites... A home for orphans is it not?"

Sha'Dria nodded. "I volunteer there twice a week. It's nice."

"The children must enjoy it."

"I do too. It's only a few hours and you know," she said, turning to stare at Vocta. "It's the little gestures that count the most."

Vocta met her eyes... "There is an old saying among my people. Words as lies, actions as truth."

"And what lies have you told me?"

"I --"

"Sir!"

The Anomid shut his eyes and took a deep breath. "What is it, Tezz?"

Perched half outside the rear door, Tezz nodded his head pointedly. "I think you want to see this..."

Sha'Dria hopped down from the compactor. "I should be getting back to work, anyway." She brushed past Tezz and vanished inside.

"Your instincts are improving," Vocta said, glowering at his assistant, "however, we still need to work on your timing."

Tezz ushered Vocta into the supply room, where containers of food and spirits were stacked ceiling-high. Jik'Tal stood amidst the surplus cache, along with a scrawny Liann resident who was currently doubled over - mostly due to the fact that the Jawa had a fistful of the human's hair.

"Forno Tanalodi. Two-credit thief, aspiring black marketeer, and all-around black nerf of the clan. Although they don't seem to mind making use of you when they need something illegal procured. I suppose it's nice to feel wanted..." Vocta tilted his head down to look into the young man's face. "How have you been boy?"

"What is the meaning of this? I demand to --" Forno's ranting was abruptly halted as Jik'Tal placed the curved vibroknife at the human's throat.

"Jik'Tal doesn't like shouting," Vocta explained. "Neither do I. For that matter, I also happen to detest beings who talk to the authorities about my private dealings. Particularly when such discourse can land myself or associates of mine in small, dank riiv-infested cells."

"I never said a word to Byeslee," the young man stammered. "It must have been someone in my organization. The Commander arrested three of them last week for class-two infractions."

Vocta didn't like the sound of that. "But you conversed with someone else?"

"There was this girl asking about you," he began reluctantly. "She looked harmless enough. Real friendly and pretty and she bought me a drink and the next thing I knew I couldn't stop talking." Tears welled in his eyes. "I swear I tried to stop, but every question she asked I answered. Oh it was horrible, like she had control of my mind." Forno sniffled. "I think she was a Dark Jedi or something..."

"I doubt it would require a Master of the Force to dominate *your* intellect. The woman merely laced your beverage with some sort of truth serum." Vocta rolled his eyes. "Let me guess... Attractive blond, small dress, big bottle of Bespin Port."

"That's it! That's it exactly. I was gonna come and tell you about it, I swear."

"But?"

"But she showed me a laser cutter and told me if I said anything to anyone she'd sever my --"

"Enough!" Vocta couldn't quite believe his ears. "This is most distressing. Imperial ISB agents don't waste their talents on routine surveillance." He looked meaningfully at Tezz. "They know about the shipment." Vocta's eyes slowly found their way back to Tanalodi. "Don't they?"

There was only silence.

"Tekka ne chas mekk?" inquired Jik'Tal.

"Yes I'm all through with him. Thank you, my friend."

"Ootayneel!" exclaimed the Jawa as he prepared to slit Forno's throat. The young human let out a terrified howl.

Vocta held up a hand. "Tsk-tsk. You know how I detest seeing violence..."

Forno looked momentarily relieved.

"Teska nu?" Jik'Tal asked, a bit perplexed.

"No, no. Go ahead and kill him," Vocta said waving his hand dismissively. "Just take him outside first."

Solette watched through her macrobinoculars as Forno Tanalodi met the Maker in the alleyway behind Bantha Traxx with a little help from a somewhat nasty Jawa who seemed to thoroughly enjoy his job.

"Shame," she said softly from over three rooftops away. "Good idiots are hard to find." This mission had provided two of them, well one now. Between Forno and that Rebel ignoramus Broegan, she could have ran the operation on droid autopilot while having her nails done.

*Speaking of which...* Solette glanced down at her new manicure. The pinky fingernail had been chipped. That was very upsetting. For 50 credits, she expected better. The old adage was true. *If you want something done right, threaten the doer with death.* When she was done here, she might go back to the beauty salon and have a long and meaningful talk with that vapehead manicurist. A conversation that would most likely involve some pain inducing equipment. The thought of that scenario brought a smile back to her face.

Solette slid the macrobinoculars back into her small replihide satchel and activated her secure comlink. "Control are you there?"

In his office, Vocta hovered over his monitor awaiting a confirmation tone from the communications relay. When he received it, the Anomid touched a small button.

A message scrawled across the screen and he spoke softly into the sensitive microphone which digitally altered his voice. "Control here. Status report..."

"On one hand, we've got the buffoonish Broegan of Alliance Special Ops. On the other hand is lovely Solette, champion of the Empire. Situated directly in the middle is our pertinacious Commander Byeslee and the Liann Military Guard. And now I find out that insipid excuse for reptiloid Na-Grujha is here on Lianna, most likely ready to double-cross me as soon as the shipment arrives." Vocta sighed loudly, looking up from the datapad. "This is a bit more complicated than I originally thought."

"You could cancel the party," suggested Tezz helpfully.

"And lose all those potential credits, let alone the prestige? Not an option."

"Isn't that better than losing the shipment, or Na-Grujha's money?" Tezz ticked them off on his fingers. "Or your freedom, or your life, or - \_"

"Enough."

"I suppose you could just kill them all..." After an uncomfortably long silence from Vocta, Tezz quickly added, "I was, of course, merely joking."

Vocta cocked an eyebrow.

Tezz sighed. "Perhaps it would be wiser to accommodate, sir."

"I never accommodate if I can help it," Vocta said. "I prefer to manipulate."

"Given the circumstances, that approach will be... difficult."

"Difficult is not commensurate with impossible. There are levels of difficulty you know."

"Really? And which level involves pulling a Death Star out of your --"

"Actually," Vocta interrupted, suitably impressed, "that gives me an interesting idea."

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The night of the benefit gala Bantha Traxx was shut down to all but the VIP crowd. Immaculately garbed valets awaited the guests at the front door, ready to check invitations and park expensive speeders.

The interior of the club was tastefully decorated, although it wasn't hard for a being to notice that a party was about to take place. Hydroballoons littered the floor and gravballons jumbled together at the ceiling. Multi-colored lumalamps sparkled in every corner. Holostreamers hung from the roof fixtures, changing color depending on the illumination. The cooling stations were manned by their superlative tenders, suitably dressed for the occasion. Sha'Dria looked resplendent in a light blue Shimmerata gown, her hair trimmed with purple-and-white star lilies.

Vocta adjusted the collar of his custom-fitted L'Dau tuxedo, tying the matching replihide half-cloak in place. He took another quick glance at Sha'Dria who caught him this time and offered an encouraging wink.

Tezz assisted his boss, knotting the cloak cord in a three-handed bow.

Vocta nodded his thanks and took a calming breath. "You know what to do when the shipment arrives."

"Like my own name, sir."

"Excellent." The Anomid patted Tezz's shoulder and went off to make the final preparations.

As he passed the Oasis, Sha'Dria said with a smile: "A credit for your thoughts."

Vocta looked her over with an appraising eye. "I was just thinking how astonishingly beautiful you appear this evening... I don't think I've ever seen a woman who looked good enough to put me to shame."

Sha'Dria blushed, or at least her mask did.

"But you come close, my dear," the Anomid said with a wink and then vanished down the hallway.

Her mouth hanging open in momentary surprise, Sha'Dria quickly recovered and chuckled to herself.

The crowd had streamed in steadily for the last hour and the club was brimming with exquisitely outfitted patrons. The most famous faces on Lianna could be spotted in the crowd, laughing, joking, and drinking... The things that socialites do best. They were all present: Terri Karl, Phillip Santhe, Sian Tirc, Kashan Santhe, Jerris Santhe, Turen Makee, and of course, Lady Valles Santhe.

Vocta dutifully made the rounds, playing the perfect host, complimenting the women and making small talk with the men. A 'My dear, you are a vision' here, a 'Those Corellian Bandits may take the Gravball championship yet' there. He personally refilled drinks, offered investment tips to those curious about Vec-Tech, and swapped gossip with the principals of Lianna's chattermill.

The animated Anomid finished pouring out the last of his brandy decanter into the glass of Turan Makee and started toward the kitchen for another bottle. Halfway there he was distracted by a particularly sheer crimson dress clinging to the lithe body of an attractive blond woman... Solette.

Not paying full attention to where he was going, Vocta accidentally bumped into a young man perfectly dressed for a soiree of this caliber, had it been held two years ago. Broegan mumbled his apologies and hastily blended unsuccessfully back into the crowd.

Vocta took a deep breath and checked his chronometer.

"Expecting someone? Or maybe *something*..." a familiar voice asked.

The Anomid looked up at Commander Byeslee, resplendent in his full military dress uniform replete with rank cylinders, epaulet cords, and enough medals to smelt down into an astromech droid.

Vocta silently began systematically examining the Commander's livery.

"May I help you?" Byeslee asked, recoiling with a noisy jangle of awarded honors.

"Just searching for the antigrav device."

"What?"

"Well with all those medals I just assumed you had one hidden somewhere on your person," Vocta said, "or else you'd no doubt tip over."

A few guests standing nearby chuckled into their dinner napkins. Before the red-faced Byeslee could respond, however, a soft Mon Calamari sea chime sounded - announcing the dessert course was about to be served.

Tezz appeared from the kitchen doors directing a small repulsorlift sled occupied by five open crates of delectable pastries, cakes, cookies, and frosted treats. Appreciative murmurs ran through the crowd as the sweet feast was set out on tables.

"Only five crates?" Byeslee asked with a dark grin. "I thought you ordered ten. In fact I'd bet on it."

"Pardon?" Vocta asked innocently.

Tezz ducked back into the kitchen, but promptly found himself backing out into the main room again at blaster-point. The crowd, hovering over the dessert tables, paused in amazement to watch a pair of Liann Military Guard armed with blaster pistols exit the kitchen, escorting out Tezz and the waiters. They were followed directly by another pair of Guards who brought out a second sled occupied by five more closed crates. They looked identical to the first set, marked 'FRAGILE - HANDLE WITH CARE - PASTRIES.'

"Look at that. Why there they are..." Byeslee sauntered over. "I wonder what's inside?"

"You'd think a Commander of the Guard would know how to read," Vocta said flatly.

"Why don't we open it up?"

"I don't think it's time," Vocta said, gesturing at the tables. "Still plenty left, you see."

The crowd was now curious, pressing in closer to get a better view.

"I insist." Byeslee motioned to the Guard surrounding the crates. They holstered their weapons and one of the men hefted a pryspanner...

The whine of a blaster bolt quieted everyone. The blast struck the ceiling, sending sparks showering down.

Broegan pointed his smoking heavy blaster at the Guard. "Nobody move. We're taking those crates out of here."

"You and what army?" sneered Byeslee.

Five other guests immediately drew their own weapons, covering the rest of the Guard. The Alliance Special Ops team had finally revealed itself.

Apparently that's just what Solette was waiting for... She stepped from the crowd behind Broegan, pressing her ionic tingler against his temple. "Good advice," she said, breathing into his ear. "I suggest you listen to yourself."

As the Rebels turned their weapons on the woman holding their leader, a squad of Imperial Stormtroopers marched out of the supply room, brandishing their blaster carbines and taking up position around the room.

Vocta whispered to Tezz, who had sidled up next to him. "Make sure we don't restock those."

Rebels and Imperials took aim at each other...

Solette addressed the crowd. "This establishment is now quarantined and I am confiscating those crates by the authority of the Empire. If you remain where you are, no one will be unnecessarily injured."

"I heartily agree," said Commander Byeslee as over a dozen more of his Military Guard burst into the club and sealed off every available exit. Each one wielded a heavy blaster rifle and currently had it pointed at either an Alliance or Imperial operative, who in turn shifted their sunsights to the newly arrived Liann Guard targeting them.

Byeslee continued: "You are all under arrest for gross violation of Liann Ordinance 316.640 prohibiting the possession of any and all weapons without a permit." He directed his own blaster pistol at Vocta, gesturing at the crates on the second repulsorlift sled. "And you are charged with importing thermal detonators onto the planet." Drawn to the spotluma, the Commander raised his voice even louder and gestured theatrically for the enjoyment of the crowd. "And not just your standard weapons of mass destruction either. Units custom-built by Luu-Mah 'Thermal' Mah-Luu with enough baradium to create 100-meter blast spheres. These uncommonly powerful detonators have a street value of 10,000 credits each. With five crates holding 50 detonators each, the grand total of this contraband equals 250,000 credits." Here he paused to allow the crowd a whistle of appreciative incredulity. "Which is how much Yin Vocta was going to pocket once he sold these terrible weapons to the Ipharian-Da'Lor crimelord, Itahn Na-Grujha."

It was truly a dramatic moment; Byeslee was practically glowing. And then events became even more exciting as a small explosion rocked the club. The floorpit at the center of the room that served as the Traxx dance floor suddenly vanished amidst a formidable puff of smoke. A large hole opened and four beings hoisted themselves out of the sewer tunnel that ran beneath the club. The shadowy figures clambered up into the room under the cover of the artificial haze.

When the smoke cleared, it was difficult to say who was more surprised, the party or the party crashers. Itahn Na-Grujha stood in the middle of the chaos, wielding a pair of blaster pistols and snapping his tail spike outward in menacing fashion. The crimelord was flanked by three Gamorrean mercs armed with large vibro-axes. Na-Grujha's intent was obviously to incite fear into a docile crowd. Unfortunately, he could not possibly foresee that a large element of this specific crowd was very heavily armed.

"All right you nerfs, stay calm! We just want the cra--"

However ignorant of the situation Na-Grujha may have been, he immediately found himself up to date... As a quarter of the attendant weaponry shifted in his direction.

Not wanting to feel left out, he pointed his own guns. "I'll kill you for this Vocta!"

The Anomid was immediately swarmed by eight black-robed Jawa Enforcers who had not been seen or heard from the entire evening, yet suddenly appeared out of the surrounding shadows. Each carried a stun pistol in his little hand. Vocta had to crouch down a bit to be fully protected.

Na-Grujha laughed at the sight.

Then the Jawas occupied their free hands by producing mini-grenades from inside their flowing robe sleeves.

The Ipharian-Da'Lor choked off his laughter as Jik'Tal landed on Na-Grujha's back. The Jawa gripped the crimelord's spinal ridge with one small hand and placed a serrated vibroblade at Na-Grujha's throat.

Vocta straightened back up and cleared his throat loudly. "Ladies and gentlebeings. I'm sure we can devise a fair and equitable solution here... Preferably one in which my bar is not damaged beyond recognition and no one gets sent to his or her maker prematurely."

"And how do you propose that miracle take place?" Byeslee scoffed.

"Because it must. Or else..." Vocta produced a small hand-held device. "Everybody dies."

"What are you chuntering about, Anomid?" Na-Grujha hissed through bared fangs, though being extremely careful not to move his neck overly much.

"This is an EES device, a little acronym for 'Emergency Evacuation System. For use when worse comes to worse and I surely think we've stumbled upon a situation that qualifies. If I press this tiny button here," Vocta said, showing the crowd exactly what he meant, "every door and window in the club immediately seals over with four inches of transparisteel. Moments later, a hundred tiny vents release Chemtrox gas into the club, killing anyone exposed within seconds. The fumes are 100 percent lethal."

"How in the galaxy does that allow anyone to escape?" Byeslee asked.

"You misunderstand. The EES is for me and me only." Vocta eyes crinkled behind the vocalizer mask. "The Chemtrox doesn't affect you if you're not breathing it in..."

"You won't get away with this," the Commander said.

"I've done nothing wrong."

"Then let me open those crates and we'll let the good citizens of Lianna decide that for themselves."

"Be my guest."

"Nice try, Vocta." Byeslee once again addressed the crowd. "As you all may or may not be aware, baradium is notoriously unstable..."

"And if anyone was an expert on instability..." Vocta murmured, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Byeslee ignored him and the resulting snickers. "If unnecessarily jarred or exposed to excessive heat, the detonators could go off. Which is why I've brought along this thalivite incendiary." He held up a thick block of white-yellow matter with a detonator switch stuck in the middle. "A relatively minor explosion will release thaliv particles into the surrounding air, bonding with the baradium and rendering it inert for a short time." The Commander offered his best triumphant stare to Vocta. "As always, my mind is one step ahead of everyone else's." He attached the device to one of the crates and then hurriedly stepped back, watching the countdown with undisguised glee. "Sometimes I amaze even myself."

The crowd backed away a bit, many of the guests covering their auditory appendages.

Byeslee's victory grin widened as a small explosion shook the repulsorlift sled. A barrage of choco-filling erupted within the blast area. Candy, cookie bits, and a few sprinkles showered the room. An industrial-sized dollop of frosting whip hurtled through the air and landed directly upon the Commander's face with startling accuracy.

The Guard members tried to be helpful by prying open the remaining crates, however the only illicit item they discovered was a relatively amoral amount of foam custard.

Vocta blinked once. "I'll let the irony speak for itself." He held up the EES. "And now back to our mass destruction or hopefully, lack thereof." The Anomid motioned to Broegan. "You and your men, *whoever you might be*, are leaving first. Have a nice day, don't come back, and I expect a credit voucher for my ceiling."

Broegan didn't have to be told twice. He and his Rebel buddies hurried out.

The Commander finished wiping the frosting from his face and bellowed. "This is intolerable."

"Let's see. Which one of your offenses could you be referring to, Commander? Defamation of character, threats, false imprisonment, willful destruction of private assets... Need I go on?"

Byeslee's mouth snapped shut.

Vocta turned to Solette. "As for our lovely ISB agent - sorry, I hope I didn't just blow your cover - I think that any Imperial interests are no longer on the premises. So you should be finished trespassing on my property."

Fuming, she spun on her stiletto heel and stormed away. Vocta leaned over to Tezz. "I hate to see her go, but I do enjoy watching her leave." He added, in a louder voice: "Don't forget your toy soldiers."

Solette motioned over her bare shoulder. The stormtroopers performed an about face and marched single-file out the front door.

"Which leaves nothing for the honored Liann Military Guard to do," Vocta said, "except arrest notorious crimelord, Itahn Na-Grujha..."

"What?"

"And since he's still wanted in about 20 star systems, whoever arrests him," the Anomid turned to Byeslee, "is bound to make all the galactic newsnets as quite a hero."

The Commander brightened a bit.

"Wouldn't surprise me at all if there was a medal to be had," Vocta added helpfully.

Byeslee's lips twitched, but he managed not to grin. Pulling a pair of magnacuffs from his belt, he personally took Na-Grujha into custody, after Jik'Tal was reluctantly convinced to climb off the crimelord's back. The rest of the Guard escorted the crimelord's three Gamorrean accomplices out of the club. Byeslee followed his men, with the angry Ipharian-Da'Lor as his prisoner.

When they passed Vocta, the Anomid whispered to Na-Grujha. "Nothing personal, Itahn. Just business."

Na-Grujha hissed back at Vocta, sputtering an extensive string of harsh Ipharian-Da'Lor curses that, luckily, no one could understand.

That left just Vocta and his bewildered guests. The Anomid took a deep breath and turned to face them.

The distinct sound of someone applauding echoed through the quiet room. Confused, Vocta looked to see who was making the noise. Sha'Dria was leaning out of her cooling station, clapping loudly. A few others soon joined in, then more, and there was even some whistling and cheering, until the whole crowd gave the Anomid a rousing ovation.

"The one thing Yin knows is how to put on a show." Lady Valles emerged from the mass of beings and laid an approving hand on Vocta's arm. "I can't wait to see what you've got planned for next year."

It was the first time in his life that the Anomid had been rendered utterly speechless.

Tezz quickly stepped in to cover his employer. "The boss is a bit choked up from your lovely approbation but I think what he's trying to say is thank you all for coming. We're glad you liked the entertainment and please enjoy the rest of the evening here at Bantha Traxx."

Vocta nodded enthusiastically.

As the crowd slowly dispersed, Tezz sidled up to his boss and thought he overheard a distinct sigh of relief escape Vocta's mask. Tezz said softly: "I'm curious. Exactly how did my mentioning the Death Star incite this plan?"

The Anomid finally found his voice. "Simple. Both endeavors had about one in a million chance of being successfully pulled off..."

"There's still a few things I don't understand though."

"And what might those be, Tezz?"

"Why would the Alliance send a buffoon like Broegan on such an important mission?"

"Perhaps they were offering up a ceremonial gundark."

Tezz was stunned. "You mean to draw attention away from an agent already in place..."

Vocta shrugged, taking in the club with a prolonged glance that lingered just a bit too long on Sha'Dria. "Anything's possible." He returned his attention to Tezz. "Other questions?"

"How in the dark heart of the Sith did you manage to sneak out the 250 real detonators?"

"You'll find out tomorrow," Vocta said simply and ever the consummate host, rejoined his party.

Sha'Dria finished reading 'The Littlest Bantha' to Miri for what must have been the thousandth time. The little girl never got tired of hearing that one. It was still quite early in the morning and the family-time room at Santhe House relatively quiet. Most of the children were asleep upstairs, dreaming of having real parents who would take care of them, and read them stories, and buy them gifts.

Miri and Sha'Dria were the only ones downstairs and thus the only ones who heard the soft door chime. They exchanged a look and the little one ran to answer it, opening the door before Sha'Dria could react.

There on the doorstep sat a small stuffed bantha with a big red bow around its neck. A tag tucked into its collar read 'FOR MIRI.' The girl was already squeezing it half to death, her eyes lit up like lumalamps on full glow. Sha'Dria hadn't seen Miri this happy in a long while.

Another tag spilled out of the beast's pouch and fluttered to the ground. Sha'Dria bent to pick it up and read, 'MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS ARE FOR EVERYBODY ELSE.' She took a cautious step outside and saw an enormous pile of stuffed banthas outside Santhe House.

249 to be exact.

Sha'Dria took a plush bantha from the pile and checked its pouch, which had been distended slightly as if something heavy and round had recently been stored inside. She had a feeling that the rest of the dolls suffered from the same unusual condition.

Sha'Dria shook her head in amazement and couldn't help but grin as she walked back inside to awaken the other kids.



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